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GEOGRAPHIC
INTELLIGENCE
MEMORANDUM

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LAOS



CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND REPORTS

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Laos, a primitive and remote country, today constitutes a highly prized piece of real estate. The strategic importance of the country derives from its location -- bordering on Communist China and North Vietnam on the north and east, and having common borders with non-Communist Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. Should Laos fall to the Communists, the limits of Communist-controlled territory would be brought into direct contact with Thailand and Cambodia and would be extended to the western flank of South Vietnam. Whatever the outcome of the current situation, the ease natural and cultural factors that have established the character of the current military operations will profoundly handicap the future achievement of economic and political stability in Laos.

Terrain

The terrain of Laos is predominantly rugged and mountainous with relatively level areas restricted to a few plateaus and the river plains. Northern Laos, the area north of Vietnam, consists of parts of what traditionally have been known as the West Yunnan Highland and the West Laos Highland, the boundary between them being the divide between the Mekong drainage system on the west and the drainage system of streams flowing eastward to the Gulf of Tonkin. The province of Sam Neua (now properly called Hou Phan) lies largely within the West Yunnan Highland. Here the predominant trend of the major mountain and valleys is northeast-southwest, and agrees from the eastern ends of the valleys is toward the Vietnam coast. In the West Laos Highland the major trend is north-south. In both areas, many of the mountains are steep sided, commonly reaching elevations of 3,000 to 6,000 feet and occasionally more than 8,000 feet. The intervening valleys are narrow, in many cases almost impassable gorges. Secondary ridges and valleys that branch off the main features have created an intricate network of spurs and valleys that makes movement, even on foot, very difficult. Locally, small plateaus, mainly of limestone, are bounded by precipitous slopes. Both of these northern highlands and extending in a northeast-southwest direction to the southern border of Laos is the mountainous belt known as the Annam Chain. Elevations of 3,000 feet are numerous near the southern limit, but, in the latitude of Savannakhet, only a few peaks exceed 4,000 feet. Immediately to the south, in the northeast extension of the range, elevations again increase and some peaks exceed 5,000 feet. The main Annam range and the outcrops along the rugged limestone areas northeast of Thailand -- comprise important obstacles to east-west traffic. Since the terrain divide is near the eastern edge of the range, east-west-running valleys are short, narrow, and steep. The westward-draining valleys within the Mekong watershed have gentler slopes and are more open. Consequently, military movement across the mountains is easier from west to east than in the opposite direction.

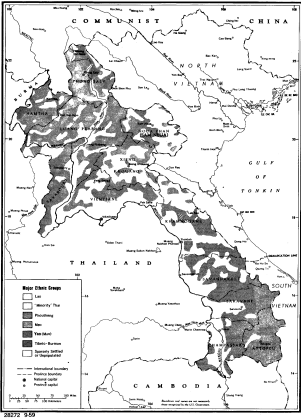
The chief areas of relatively level surface in Laos are found on two plateaus -- Nam Khou and Bolaven -- and in plains areas along the Mekong River. To the southeast of Luang Prabang, roughly centered in Kiang Khouang, is the rectangular-shaped Plateau of Nam Khou, which has been covered to a high fortification surrounded by many lines of ramparts and walls. Its military importance lies in the extensive areas of level land, which provides sites for air bases, in the midst of very rugged mountains. The plateau, at an elevation of about 3,700 feet, is made up of 3 plateaus separated by hills. The lowest being the Plateau des Jarnes. The Plateau des Bolaven is east of Pakse, has an undulating surface and an elevation of about 4,000 feet. Currently (1959), a jeep trail is being built from Nam Khou to South Vietnam to Attapeu in Laos which will connect with the route from Pakse that crosses the Plateau des Bolaven.

Of the river plains the most important are those centered on Savannakhet and on the capital city of Vientiane. The Savannakhet plain, an area of undulating surface between the Mekong and the Annam Chain is approximately 100 miles long by 80 miles wide. It is the site of the large military air base of Laos. The strategic route between Bangkok, Northeast Thailand, and Hong Kong, South Vietnam, crosses the Savannakhet plain. The plain extends in Vietnam, some 70 miles long from north to south and 20 to 40 miles wide, is almost flat, but it is largely open and marsh covered. The rail line from Bangkok terminates at Song Khat, Thailand, across the river from the Vietnamese shore.

Climate

Laos has a monsoonal climate with pronounced wet and dry seasons and relatively small temperature ranges from season to season. The mean annual temperature in Luang Prabang, at about 1,000 feet elevation, is 79°F. In January, freezing temperatures may occur at high elevations, and uncommonly cold nights may be experienced at midday elevations and only in January but also during the rainy.

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Season. Throughout most of the country, however, the rainy season, which lasts from late May into October, is hot and humid whereas the dry season from November into April is characterized by clear weather with many days of moderate temperature. The amount of annual rainfall varies with elevation and with exposure is related to the moisture-laden southeast monsoon winds. The west side of the Annam Chain in Laos receive very heavy rainfall. The Plateau des Bolaven, a little to the west of the main chain, receives an annual mean rainfall of 265 inches, of which 113 inches fall during the period from July through October, by the contrast, the only in the north. Annually receives about 66 inches, of which 31 inches fall between July and October, after October and for the duration of the dry season, the average monthly precipitation is less than 1 inch throughout most of Laos, but heavy rains associated with typhoons that strike the Vietnamese coast may occur occasionally in October or November.

During the rainy season, flooded rivers overflow their banks, the ground becomes saturated or rocky, making surface travel difficult or even impossible and curtailing air transport. Road conditions improve, and good flying weather predominates throughout most of Laos from November through March. Although

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snowing fog and haze are common, particularly in the valleys, they generally dissipate by 10 A.M. By contrast, hot flying weather prevails along the Annamese coast of North Vietnam between 10° and 12°N from November to January and along all of the north Annam coast from January through April as a result of the monsoon, a season of frequent and persistent low ceilings and drizzle.

Vegetation

The natural vegetation of most of Laos, confined with rugged terrain, creates a formidable obstacle to cross-country movement along established routes. The greater part of the country has a dense cover of broadleaf evergreen forest with undergrowth varying from a low carpet of ferns to rather small plants where the high forest canopy is continuous. To a white tangled mass of vines and similar trees (including bamboo) where the forest is broken and allows sunlight to penetrate. The forests are more open (1) in the area centered roughly on the stretch of the Nam Khou and Bolaven Plateau and (2) in the Savannakhet Plateau and (3) on the Plateau of Nam Khou and Bolaven. The plateau on the Plateau of Nam Khou are largely grass covered, as are also these somewhat slopes that in the past have been subjected to native slash-and-burn agriculture.

Religion

Although Laos has an estimated population of only 5,000,000 (1956), it is a veritable ethnographic mosaic. The Lao, a subgroup of the Tai ethnic group constituting 70 to 75 percent of the population, are culturally and politically dominant. A number of small indigenous minority groups, subdivided into numerous tribes, and several nonindigenous minority groups comprise the remainder of the population. The largest of these, probably numbering more than 350,000, is the indigenous group officially known as the Phoukhong (mountain people) or Loum (mountain Lao), but commonly called by the derogatory term "Hao" (slave). Other important indigenous groups are the Miao (about 100,000), the Yao (20,000-25,000), and a number of Tibeto-Burman peoples (15,000-20,000). Important nonindigenous minorities include an estimated 15,000-20,000 Vietnamese and 10,000-20,000 Chinese.

The distribution of the major ethnic groups is shown on Map 20072. The Lao and other Tai groups inhabit the lowlands, mainly along river valleys only occasionally are they found at higher elevations. The non-Tai groups characteristically live at higher elevations, in the mountains or on the high plateaus. The Hm and the Yao usually live at elevations up to 3,000 feet; the Hm and Tibeto-Burman, above 3,000 feet. The Vietnamese and Chinese are generally found in urban areas. According to a 1977 report, there were 2,000 Vietnamese in Vientiane, 7,000 in Savannakhet, 5,000 in Thakhek, 1,000 in Pakse, and 1,000 in Luang Prabang. Reportedly the main concentrations of Chinese are 15,000 in Vientiane, 7,000 in Pakse, 5,000 in Savannakhet, 1,000 in Luang Prabang, 1,000 in Thakhek, and 1,000 in Kiang Khouang. According to a 1979 Chinese intelligence source, an additional 1,000 Chinese refugees fled from Mainland China across the border into northern Laos.

The linguistic situation is equally complex, with all of the major linguistic groups of Southeast Asia represented in Laos. The Tai linguistic stock, historically and culturally the most important, is represented by the Loum, Loum, Hm, and Yao. The Tibeto-Burman stock, the official language of the nation, the primary tongue of most of the population, and the "lingua franca" of the country, is spoken by the Hm, the Yao, and the Chinese. The Loum, the primary tongue of the minority groups, speak 2 or even 3 languages.

Inherent in such ethnographic complexity is the weakening effect it has on national solidarity. Although individual minority groups are small, collectively they constitute a large proportion of the total population of Laos. The minority groups are culturally diverse and politically distinct from each other. For the most part, they are culturally unsocialized and traditionally disregarded by the Lao majority; government officials and workers of the upper class expect hostility and even servility from them. This situation has engendered a feeling of resentment, even antipathy, toward the government among at least some of the minorities. Such attitudes are particularly antagonistic to anti-communist propaganda.

* The term "Hao" is used to refer to members of the ethnic subgroup and the term "Hao" to the larger ethnic group, which includes the Lao and a number of smaller tribes. "Hao" refers to citizens of Laos and "Hao" to citizens of Thailand. The designations "Hao" (Tai Diao), "White Tai" (Tai Kham), and "Black Tai" (Tai Diao) apply to various groups distinguished on the basis of the color of the clothes traditionally worn by them.

The official and dominant faith of the Kingdom of Laos is Theravada (or Hinayana) Buddhism, but it is a Buddhism permeated with Animism. Both the Lao and other tribal groups are steeped in spirit worship. From the standpoint of ideology, Buddhism will probably not be much of a bulwark against Communism because of its essentially passive nature. Furthermore, Communists reportedly made some inroads among the Buddhist population while Phoumi Vongkham, a Communist-backed Lao, was minister of religion for Laos in 1956.

Roads

Laos is an agricultural country; industry is virtually nonexistent. The Lao and other people in the lowland valleys cultivate paddy (wet rice) as their principal crop. Three main varieties of rainy-season rice are grown: an early variety planted in June and harvested in November; regular paddy planted in May and June and harvested in November and December; and a late-ripening variety planted in May and June but not maturing until late December or January. Most of the hill tribes practice "rain" agriculture, which entails slash-and-burn clearing of wooded areas, followed by dry rice cultivation. Midfall is relied upon to furnish the necessary moisture for the hillside crops, and no dikes are built around the fields. Dry rice is planted at the beginning of the rainy season and harvested in the Fall. The Miao also practice "rain" agriculture in the growing of opium poppies. Almost all of the Loum people depend upon hunting and fishing to supplement farming.

Transportation

Transportation and communication facilities in Laos are inadequate even under ideal weather conditions. Their limited utility is even further curtailed during the rainy season. Laos has no rail lines and only a very limited number of roads. Few stretches of the roads can be used the year round by motor vehicles of all types; consequently, motor traffic is greatly restricted or impossible in the rainy season. (See Map 20013 and Transportation Notes for the condition of roads in Laos, and roads and rail lines in Thailand.) Paved, actual-driven roads, and routes are widely used to move cargo over the steep grade trails and tracks, particularly in the interior of the country. In the area north of Luang Prabang, including Phou Khou, high water lasts from May through September from Luang Prabang southeast within the Mekong watershed, it prevails from May through October. In most of Hou Phan (Savannakhet), the period of high water is from July through October and in the eastern part of the Plateau of Nam Khou, it lasts from August through November.

Many of the rivers of Laos are also important arteries of travel, at least locally and the larger ones have even been used in military operations. Although the most important of the rivers in Laos are within the Mekong watershed, most of the main rivers in Hou Phan (Savannakhet) and some in the eastern part of the Plateau of Nam Khou flow from the north to the south. The Mekong, the largest of the rivers, is the only one that flows from the north to the south. During the wet season the range of navigability on most rivers is greatly increased over that of the dry season. (See Map 20013 and Transportation Notes for the range of high water vary in length in different parts of the country. In the area north of Luang Prabang, including Phou Khou, high water lasts from May through September from Luang Prabang southeast within the Mekong watershed, it prevails from May through October. In most of Hou Phan (Savannakhet), the period of high water is from July through October and in the eastern part of the Plateau of Nam Khou, it lasts from August through November.)

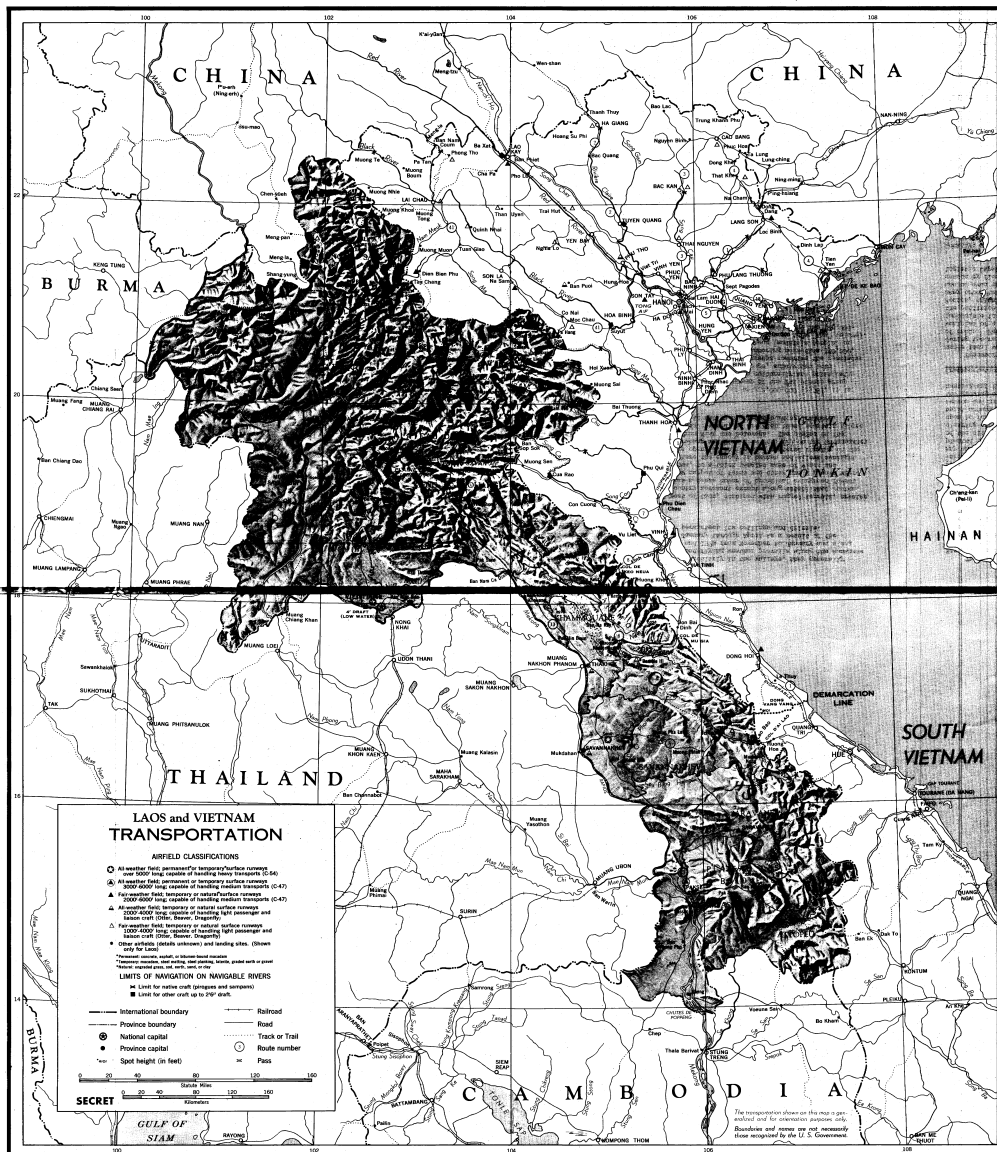
Because of limited ground and river transportation facilities, air transport is extremely important, often the only means of supplying remote areas. Weather conditions, however, particularly in the rainy season, can severely limit air operations both by interfering with actual flying and by rendering some of the airfield-surface difficult to approach. (See Map 20013 for location of airfields.)

Effect on Military Operations

Factors of military geography suggest that guerrilla tactics will, to a large extent, characterize the pattern of military operations in Laos -- particularly during the rainy season. In areas near North Vietnam supply points, anti-government guerrilla forces might successfully obtain limited objectives, among them the establishment of advance bases for more intensive military efforts that could be launched at the advent of the dry season. During the dry season, logistical support for such military operations by air troops indigenous to Southeast Asia would be facilitated by the fact that the onset of dry weather coincides with the rice harvest, thus augmenting the capability of native troops to live partially or totally off the land.

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